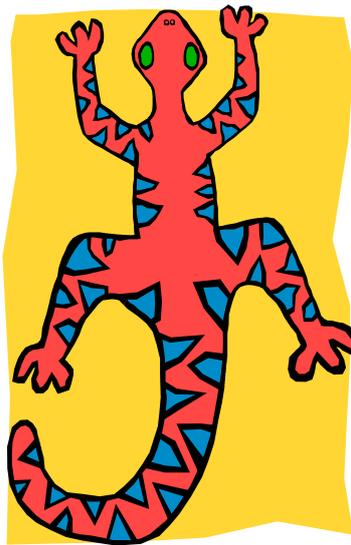


# Brothers Inside

## Reflections on fathering workshops with Indigenous prisoners



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*The* UNIVERSITY  
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Between October 2004 and March 2006 Brothers Inside facilitated five fathering workshops for Indigenous inmates in the Cessnock Correctional Complex. Brothers Inside was a project of the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle, with funding from the Mercy Foundation and the Perpetual Foundation. The workshops were an opportunity for the facilitators and inmates to explore the experiences of Indigenous inmates as fathers, to obtain a greater awareness of the needs of incarcerated Indigenous fathers and to trial the workshops in a prison setting. This report discusses what was learnt through the project.

Brothers Inside grew out of the Engaging Fathers Program, which aims to promote the well being of children from 0 to 8 years of age by engaging fathers and father figures in the lives of children. The Engaging Fathers Program supports family services, antenatal, schools, childcare and early education institutions to better recruit and engage fathers and father figures with their children. Since 2000 the Engaging Fathers Project has employed an Indigenous worker (Craig Hammond) to work with Indigenous fathers. During his discussions with service providers and community members, a number of people raised concerns about Indigenous fathers in prison. Following discussion with staff at Cessnock Correctional Complex, Brothers Inside was developed as a pilot project.

The anticipated outcomes of Brothers Inside were:

- Enhanced capacity of Indigenous inmates to rejoin their families and communities upon release from prison
- Strengthened relationships between Indigenous men and service providers to support the men's successful return to the community
- Harnessing the men's creativity in order to develop ideas for resources showing strong positive images of Indigenous men in their family and community
- Strengthened capacity of the Indigenous inmates as fathers and father figures.

## **THE CONTEXT**

The workshops were held at Cessnock Correctional Complex, in the minimum security section. Prison staff, especially the Manager of Offender Services and Programs and the Aboriginal Teacher, were very supportive of Brothers Inside. The prison conducts a variety of programs for inmates including fathering workshops (which did not target Indigenous inmates) and days for inmates and their children. Indigenous inmates were not accessing the mainstream fathering programs, so in consultation with correction centre staff, Brothers Inside was developed specifically for Indigenous inmates.

## **THE WORKSHOPS**

The main focus of the project was conducting workshops with Indigenous fathers in Cessnock Correction Centre. The aims of the workshops were:

1. To highlight the importance of fathers in their children's lives
2. To explore the roles the participants play as fathers (both in and out of prison) and ways in which they could strengthen these roles
3. To identify ways in which the participants could strengthen their connections with their children.

The workshops were based on the beliefs that:

- We all have strengths as dads
- Dads are very important in the lives of their children

- Sometimes dads need to be like a rock and stand firm, and sometimes they need to be like water and go with the flow.

Prior to the workshops, where possible, individual discussions were held with participants about:

- What they wanted from the course
- Some background on their families
- Their relationship with their family and elders
- What contact they had with their families while 'inside'
- How being in prison had affected their relationship with their children
- What they would like for their children.

During the interviews we also explained what participants could expect from the workshop, our expectations (e.g., attendance) and began the process of building a relationship. We were not able to conduct the interviews prior to some workshops, which resulted in problems arising that we believe could have been prevented by the interviews.

Besides the first workshop (which was half a day a week for eight weeks), the workshops were 4.5 days, ideally spread over 2 weeks. We attempted to have four days of workshops (generally 9.00 to 3.30) and a half-day celebration where we shared a meal, encouraged community building and gave out certificates. Because of the high turn over of inmates, holding the workshop over a short period of time increased the likelihood that participants will be able to complete the course. The uncertainty of working in the prison meant that workshops did not always proceed as planned and so some of the workshops were spread over three weeks.

Workshops involved a variety of activities including:

- Building a sense of community (e.g., by eating together)
- Physical Rock and Water activities
- Group discussion
- Art work
- Poetry
- Videoing messages to their children (in some workshops).

The workshop content included:

- The importance of fathers
- Their strengths as fathers
- Communication
- Keeping kids safe (e.g., child abuse, discipline)
- Experiences of being fathers
- Childhood development
- What makes a good father
- Their roles as fathers
- Resilience
- Ways of strengthening their connections with their children.

Some workshops included aspects of the Rock and Water program. Rock and Water is based on four themes:

1. *Grounding, centring and focusing*: Learning how to stand firm and relaxed. How to concentrate your breath in your belly and focus attention.
2. *The golden triangle of body-awareness – emotional awareness – self-awareness*: Emotions are expressed in the body by way of muscular tension. Therefore, increasing body-awareness can lead to more insight and experience of one's own patterns of reaction which, in turn, can offer a chance to deepen and further develop emotional awareness and self-awareness.
3. *Communication*: The development of physical forms of communication as a basis for the development of other, more verbally oriented, forms of communication.
4. *The Rock & Water concept*: The tough, immovable rock attitude versus the mobile, communicative water attitude. This concept can be developed and applied at various levels: the physical, the mental and the social level. At a physical level it means that an attack can be parried by firmly strained muscles (rock) but also, and often even more effectively, by moving along with the energy of the attacker (water). At a social and relationship level, for instance as a parent, it is also possible to choose between a rock or water attitude.

While we did not use the whole program, we incorporated a number of exercises and concepts from the program. Because Rock and Water is a very physical program, it provided the Brothers (the Indigenous participants) with a different learning style. Some groups were not particularly interested in the physical activity being more interested in “yarning,” and when this was the case we did very little from the Rock and Water program. At a future stage we could trial a complete Rock and Water program.

We ensured each workshop included creative activities such as drawing and writing poetry. These activities were taken very seriously by the participants and once again allowed a change in learning style. In some workshops we also provided the Brothers with the opportunity to video tape messages to their families. There were some difficulties involved in organising the videos and ensuring families received the messages, which would need to be resolved for future workshops.

## THE PARTICIPANTS

A total of 60 Indigenous inmates took part in the program of whom 43 received certificates for completing the program. Apart from the first program where 10 participants attended only part of the program, attendance was strong and non-completion was generally due to external factors (e.g., release from prison, transfer to another prison, court appearances).

Workshop	Total Participants	Participants receiving certificates
October/November 2004	16	6
May 2005	9	7
June 2005	10	9
October 2005	12	10
March 2006	13	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>43</b>

**Table 1: Workshop participants**

The Brothers ranged in age from 18 to their mid 50’s and had up to 12 children. Most of them had between 1 and 3 children but there were a significant number who had between 8 and 12 children (either with the same partner or a number of different partners). Some also had a

number of grandchildren. Each workshop had 1 or 2 participants who had no children. We decided to allow participants without children to take part because they intended to become fathers and were able to consider their relationship with nieces and nephews or other children. Not surprisingly, participants without children were more likely to drop out of the course or not to be as actively involved.

While we did not explore their offences, comments made by various inmates indicated that there were a range of offences including minor ones (such as driving while disqualified), drug related offences including theft, and violent crimes such as rape, double manslaughter and murder. The length of sentences ranged from a few months up to 13 years. Some of the participants had been in and out of prison since they were teenagers.

### **INMATES EXPERIENCE OF BEING FATHERS AND BEING FATHERED**

E had three children (aged 7, 5 and 3). His two eldest children were with their grandparents because their mother was also in prison. He saw his youngest child, who is also with grandparents, about once a month but had not seen his other two children for the three years he has been in prison. Of his youngest he said “she knows that I’m her dad, but doesn’t really know what a dad is.”

J and his partner had 12 children. He had been sentenced to three and a half years (it was reduced to 18 months on appeal) for driving while disqualified. He said on the day he was in court, a “white fella” was sentenced before him to 9 months weekend detention for driving recklessly and risking the safety of others. When he went into the court and received his sentence he said “it ripped my heart out.” His family visited every week and he said that when they leave, they wave all the way to the exit, and it is as hard as when he was first sentenced. When he spoke about his children in the workshop he was close to tears.

C had a 2 ½ year old daughter who was in care because he was in prison and his partner was using drugs. He was quite angry about the whole situation and expressed great frustration because he had been told that he could have a video link visit with his child but it had not happened yet. He said he was being “ripped apart” by the situation and his frustration and anger kept coming up during the workshop. He was hoping the workshops would help him regain custody of his child when he was released.

H had previously been jailed for domestic violence. He was jailed after he had badly injured his partner, to the extent that when he left the house he thought he had killed her. At the time of his offence his children were 1 and 2 and he had not seen them since – over 12 years ago. He wanted to make contact with them and was not sure how to go about it.

P had been in prison for over 10 years and was due for release in 12-18 months. While he had been in regular contact with his children (who were now teenagers) during this time, he used the workshops to help prepare him for his return home.

B had four children aged from 14 to 25 and also four grandchildren aged 8 and under. He was part of the stolen generation, being removed from his family when he was about 10. When he was jailed his ex-partner stopped him from seeing his younger children and changed the phone number so he was unable to ring them. He was hoping to gain access through the family court. His eldest son was in prison with him for a while (after breaking an Apprehended Violence Order). They shared a cell for some of the time but the relationship was not easy.

D had two children (aged 10 and 5). D had sole custody of the 10 year old so the child went into care when he was jailed. During the course he had the first visit with his 5 year old since being jailed, but had not seen his 10 year old while in prison. He said that the worse thing about being in prison was not being able to hold his children and that “it just tears me apart.” He said he had stopped taking drugs so that he could get better access to his children: “It was drugs or my kids and I’m not going pick drugs over my kids.”

F was a 24 year old with an 8 year old child he had not seen for 3 years. F had tried to arrange for his mother to bring his son for a visit but was still waiting for the first visit. Contact was also hard because the phone kept being disconnected and the phone number changed. He thought he would be able to find the phone number through his brother who still saw the child occasionally.

G, a 24 year old who had been in juvenile detention and prison since he was 15, met his natural father for the first time in prison. G said it took a while before he said hello to his father, but eventually did. They did not have an easy relationship and soon after they met, G was sent to segregation. By the time G was out of segregation his father had been released, and died before G saw him again.

N spoke about life on the mission and how issues were often swept under the carpet. He spoke about a situation where an older man was forcing two teenage girls to have sex with him. Even though their parents and bothers knew about it, they did nothing about it. He also spoke about a girl who was being abused by her uncle and her family would not believe her because they said the uncle would not do that.

A had two children aged 17 and 15 who he had not seen for four years because he was inside. Before he was jailed this time, he decided to visit his children and to give them some money. Despite an Apprehended Violence Order preventing contact he went around to his ex-partner’s. While he was out the front of the house in his car, his ex-partner’s boyfriend pulled a knife out and threatened him. A then pulled out a gun. He told us “I was sitting in the car with the gun and thought, if I stay I’m going to use it, so I decided to get out of there.” Not long after this incident he was locked up for quite a long stretch.

M had two children (2 and 3) and said that when he first went into prison he quit smoking because he had to choose between buying cigarettes or ringing his family. By quitting smoking he had the money he needed to be able to ring every day. He said it was an easy choice and that he did not have any cravings because he knew why he was doing it. Making phone calls was not always an easy process. Inmates can have six phone numbers at a time (which have to be authorised by the prison and can be changed as often as the inmates wish) pre-set into the limited number of inmate phones. After six minutes the phones automatically disconnected and inmates have to return to the back of the queue for the phone. Because M’s family lived quite a long way away, his family could not visit often and the phone calls became quite expensive. Many of the Brothers found the process of making phone calls difficult.

After a workshop, T spoke to his daughter for the first time in about two years. During the workshop we had discussed what he might say and how he might handle it. He said that the conversation had been “funny but OK” and that our discussion had been helpful.

Some of the Brothers said they tried not to think about their children too much because it was too painful. As one said, “I try to put it at the back of my mind, but they are always there.” In regards to children, they spoke about getting through prison with out focussing on “all the negative stuff.” Likewise, some of them did not want their children to visit them for variety of reasons:

- Some of the children were scared when they came to visit
- Some felt their families were treated quite badly by custodial staff and were treated like they were criminals as well.
- One did not want his children to know he was in prison and so told them that he had a job in a remote location.
- They said that it could sometimes take nearly two hours too get through reception, and that their families could be patted down and be subjected to sniffer dogs. Some of them did not want to put their children through that.

Protecting their families, even when they were inside, was very important to most of them. Some of the Brothers said that if anyone touched their families they would take the law into their own hands to deal with the offender. They would not care if they were jailed for a long time because their children would know that they stood up for them.

Issues raised by the Brothers in relation to their experience of being fathers while in prison included:

- They believed that most people had no idea of what their experience was like. As one commented, “Try putting yourself in our shoes and seeing what it is like being a father inside.” They wanted to people to know that “we are still fathers and we still have a strong sense of being a father.”
- Another participants said, “even though we are criminals we are still humans and still have families. We know how to show affection.”
- They felt that many people judged them without meeting them. While they may have committed a crime and were in prison, it did not mean they were all bad, nor did it mean that they were bad fathers. In particular they felt that the Department of Community Services judged them as bad fathers regardless of their crime. They also felt that it was not always recognised when they tried to better themselves while they were in prison.
- One said “I don’t care what other people think of me, but I mean that in a nice way.” In other words he attempted to do what he thought was best for him and his children and did not care how other people might judge him for it.
- They wanted their children to know that they would be there for them, that they wanted to have contact with them and that they were loved. They hoped their children would be willing to have a go, be happy and not end up in prison.

Many of the Brothers spoke about how, when growing up, it was their mothers who held their families together and that their fathers were not around much. Some did not have strong father figures in their lives, while others had a significant uncle, brother or pop who acted as a father figure. In one of the workshops three of the brothers spoke about how things started to fall apart for them (eventually leading them to prison) when the main father figure in their life (a grandfather, an elder brother and a father) died. Some of the Brothers spoke about how it was their children’s mothers who held things together now. One of the Brothers said that his partner was the “brains of the outfit,” that when it came to his family he did not make decisions without her and that she “kept me in line.”

## **DISCIPLINE**

One of the biggest issues in the workshop (besides issues related to being separated from their children) was how to discipline. Nearly all the Brothers had been “flogged” as children (e.g., with bare hands, thin branches from trees or electrical chords). Some of them thought it was too harsh and that they would never do it to their children. Others thought “a good flogging didn’t do me any harm,” and that it taught them respect and to tell right from wrong. One of them commented, jokingly, that his parents discipline had not worked because he had ended up in prison. Most of them, however, said it was not their parents’ fault that they ended up in prison.

When asked about discipline, most of the Brothers said they would talk issues over with their children and try to see their side of things. Their actual strategies, however, were more authoritarian. Most of them believed it was appropriate to use physical discipline (within limits) although some preferred to use strategies such as groundings. One of the Brothers spoke about how his children had smashed things up at the school and as a punishment he told them to pack up their things and get in the car. He drove for awhile before stopping by the side of road. After telling them to get out and find themselves new parents he drove off, but kept them in sight. After his children started crying, he waited a little while and returned to pick them up. Most of the other Brothers believed this was an appropriate response.

It was a topic we regularly returned to, not just during the session on keeping kids safe. For example, K spoke about being in a pub late one night and seeing his 13 years old daughter out, which lead to a discussion about how they might handle the situation. Most of their responses were initially quite authoritarian but we were able to discuss other responses by using real life examples.

## **WHAT WORKED WELL**

- *Being flexible.* Flexibility was needed in order to cope with lock downs (where inmates were confined to their cells or wing), changes in attendance and being able to adapt agendas and process depending on the participants’ priorities and interests.
- *Taking biscuits and sweets.* The inmates really appreciated the fact that we brought in biscuits and sweets. While this may appear a relatively insignificant part of the workshops, it demonstrated that we, as facilitators, valued the inmates and helped promote a positive relationship between the facilitators and inmates.
- *Having one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal facilitators.* Both of us played a useful role in the workshop. The Aboriginal facilitator (Craig) was seen as having real credibility and experience, and had significant connections with the communities the inmates related to. The non-Aboriginal facilitator (Graeme) felt comfortable asking questions about the role of fathers and fathering practices in Aboriginal communities which encouraged discussion about issues that otherwise might have been taken for granted.
- *Use of posters and DVD.* Craig had developed a series of posters and a DVD promoting positive images and messages about Indigenous fathers. The Brothers appreciated the

positive approach (most images of Indigenous men are negative) and the resources opened up significant opportunities for discussion.

- *Participation by the inmates.* As in most workshops, some participants were more actively involved than others, but generally there was good participation. There was often lively discussion, they were quite open and willing to discuss their experience of being fathers, and were willing to give their feedback about the process. At times participants were willing to challenge each other about their attitudes towards fathering. Two examples:
  - H (who was hoping to make contact with his children for the first time in 12 years) was not sure what to say or how to say it, so he was thinking that he would leave it to his daughter to ask lots of questions. The other Brothers said that he needed to take more of the initiative because he was the father and should not just leave it to his daughter.
  - S said that his kids got into trouble no matter what he said or did and that his behaviour did not really influence their behaviour. The other Brothers challenged him and argued that as a role model for his children his behaviour did matter and that he had a large influence on their lives.
- *The workshop content.* The workshop content attempted to achieve a balance between exploring their experiences and current roles, and input of ideas and strategies that could improve their parenting skills.
- *The relationship developed between the facilitators and prison staff.* Staff at the prison were helpful, particularly the Aboriginal teacher. Other staff also provided assistance and one of the non-Aboriginal teachers occasionally participated in a session and made a positive contribution.
- *Having a non-judgemental attitudes.* Part way through the first program we learnt that some of the inmates had been concerned that we would tell them how to be “good” fathers and that we would assume that they were “bad” fathers. Through the workshop we were careful to respect their experience, to be non-judgemental and we received feedback from the inmates that they felt respected and listened to. It was important to the Brothers that we did respect their experiences and expertise.
- *Father and children days.* Prior to the workshops commencing, the prison had established fathers and children days. None of the Indigenous inmates had participated but following the second workshop, two of the participants took part in a day. Brothers from later workshops also participated in further days. The fathering workshops created an environment where the Brothers were more receptive to taking part in the days and provided an indication to staff about who could be approached to participate.
- Some of the Brothers said the workshops were the best courses they had ever done.

## CHALLENGES

There were numerous challenges with the workshops, most of which arise from the context of the workshops. The following are some of the key challenges we faced.

- *Buy-up days.* Workshops that coincided with “buy-up” days, when inmates receive goods they ordered from the prison store, were more likely to be disruptive. We found that the

participants were often more distracted on these days as they often wanted to make sure that they had received their purchases, they needed to settle accounts (between inmates) and were generally somewhat unsettled. Where possible we avoided buy-up days and if we were unable to, the Aboriginal teacher attempted to organise the buy-ups in a way which disrupted the workshop as little as possible.

- *Inconsistent attendance.* Particularly in the first workshop, attendance varied from session to session which interfered with the continuity of the program. As our main aims for the first workshop were to build relationships and gain credibility with the inmates, it did not matter too much for the first program. Attendance was much better in the other workshops although at times there were still problems. Non attendance was caused by a wide range of reasons including:
  - Being released or transferred to another prison
  - Having another appointment (e.g., a meeting with their solicitor or appearing before the classification review panel or parole board)
  - Receiving bad news (e.g., having a re-classification rejected or family problems)
  - Deciding the workshop was not meeting their needs.
  
- *Poor rooms.* Some of the rooms we had to use were not really suitable for the workshops (e.g., one was too open to interruptions, another was too small). Where possible the Aboriginal teacher organised us one of three rooms that were suitable. The one we found best was a large room (used for carpentry) which had an outside and a fenced off from other inmates. This meant we were less likely to be interrupted and were less reliant on custodial staff to let us in. With most of the other rooms a custodial officer had to be present in the building or we could not proceed, which occasionally meant we were delayed.
  
- *Disruptions due to operational requirements.* Due to operational requirements, the workshops were sometimes interrupted. In particular there was a lockdown at least once during each workshop series. Lockdowns could be a result of security breaches (e.g., a gun was found near the perimeter of the prison), cell searches, stop work meetings, or for some other reason (e.g., there was a lockdown on the afternoon of the Melbourne Cup). Participants were sometimes unable to attend a session due to requirements of the prison (as discussed above) or transferred in the middle of a workshop series.
  
- *Inmate behaviour.* Although most workshops have some challenging behaviour, the context of prison workshops meant that there was often the potential for incidents to escalate. Most of the incidents were relatively minor but if addressed inappropriately the situation could have become uncontrollable or the facilitators could have lost the respect of the participants. There is the need to have skilled facilitators who are able to address challenging behaviour in a not threatening manner. Examples included:
  - One of the Brothers took the batteries from a TV remote, but returned them after the facilitators discussed the situation with the inmates.
  - Two of the Brothers got up and left the room to go to the toilet, in the middle of another Brother talking about an experience that was quite meaningful to him.
  - Some of the Brothers became quite agitated when they could not have a smoke break because we were not allowed to leave the room. Inmates had been confined to their wings, but we had been given permission to continue to the workshop as long as we remained inside at all times.

- Two Brothers became involved in an altercation which had the potential to become physical.
- *Keeping it real.* At times we felt that the Brothers said what they thought we wanted to hear in the hope that it would help with re-classification (e.g., so that they were eligible for weekend leave) or when applying for parole. We needed to work hard to ensure that the workshops remained as genuine as possible.

## WHAT WE LEARNT

- The workshops were fairly labour intensive. Each series of workshops involved about 70-75 hours for each of the two facilitators. This included:
  - 5 hours – pre-workshop interviews (including travel)
  - 24 hours – workshops
  - 5 hours – post workshop celebration and follow up
  - 2-6 hours – unexpected lock downs, rescheduling and other unexpected delays
  - 10-12 hours – debriefing, planning, liaison with prison staff
  - 5-6 hours – evaluation and reporting
  - 2-3 hours – preparing resources, shopping etc
  - 12-14 hours – travel.
- The pre workshop interviews were important in laying the foundation for the workshops. They allowed the Brothers to be prepared for the workshop, began the process of building relationships, and identified if there were any specific issues the Brothers wanted from the workshop.
- The Rock and Water had the potential to provide a strong foundation for the workshops but some Brothers were not very interested in participating in the activities. In some workshops the physical activities were quite popular, but in other workshops participants preferred to “yarn”. The facilitators needed to be able to adapt the workshops to the participants’ interests.
- Having some older fathers in the group and having some fathers who had been in prison for a number of years were helpful. The more experienced fathers brought valuable insights to the workshops while the people who have been in detention for some time could bring stability and an understanding of prison culture.
- Many of the Brothers had not had much contact with their children and wanted to build a relationship with them. They were often unsure about how to go about it.
- Workshops over a short time frame (i.e. two to three weeks) were more successful than ones spread over more of weeks. The shorter time frame meant that participants were more likely to complete the workshops.
- The workshops could not have occurred without support from prison staff.
- While there were many similarities with community-based workshops, the context of the prison requires higher-level facilitation skills. The potential for little things to escalate or

for things to go wrong was always present and facilitators needed to be able to respond to a wide range of issues. It was thus important to have at least two facilitators for the workshops to ensure the safety of the facilitators and the participants.

- The Brothers would like more information about their legal rights as fathers and would like the workshops to be recognised by Department of Community Services.
- Many of the participants were mistrustful of people in authority and, like any workshop, the facilitators needed to demonstrate their credibility to each group. For example, at the start of the second series of workshops L asked if they needed to say anything and, if they did not, whether or not it would affect their certificate at the end of the workshop. During one of the breaks on the first day, L quizzed Graeme (the non-Indigenous facilitator) about his training, background and fathering experience. Graeme felt that L was checking if he was there as an “expert” with “text book” knowledge, rather than as a father who was sharing his experience. Towards the end of the workshop L asked Graeme what he had learnt from the workshop. L was apparently satisfied with the responses and the workshop process because he ended up being actively involved throughout the workshop and he encouraged other inmates to attend future workshops.
- Fathering workshops were a positive way to engage participants and to discuss a wide range of issues. Many workshops focus on negative behaviour (e.g., drug use, violence) but father workshops focus on something the Brothers were interested in and wanted to be good at. Through the workshop it was possible to discuss issues such as drug use and violence in terms of how it impacted on their relationship with their children, which provide a positive context for the discussion.

#### **ABOUT THE FAMILY ACTION CENTRE**

The Family Action Centre exists to strengthen families and communities by developing and implementing programs, research, training and creating models of practice that promote sustainability, social justice and community leadership. Staff at the centre believe in the importance of families and build on the strengths already existing in individuals, families and communities. Part of the University of Newcastle, the Family Action Centre receives funds from state and federal government departments, philanthropic organisations, corporate and private sponsorships and also generates independent income.